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SUBJECT: THAILAND'S LOWER NORTHEAST: A LOOK AT NEWIN
CHIDCHOB,S WOULD BE FIEFDOM

REF: A. BANGKOK 2418 (RUBBER SAPLING VERDICT)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 1541 (THAKSIN SUPPORTER WINS BY-ELECTION)
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 1491 (BELWETHER BY-ELECTION)

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Classified By: POL Counselor George Kent, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Newin Chidchob, godfather of government coalition partner Phumjai Thai, has had a good year by almost any measure. His father is Parliament Speaker; his party holds a disproportionate number of cabinet jobs compared to its 32 MPs; Phumjai Thai aspires to increase its share of MP seats in the next elections; and he was recently acquitted in a corruption case (REF A). The only dark spot was the by-election spanning Phumjai Thai suffered this summer to pro-Thaksin Puea Thai in Newin's electoral stronghold in Thailand's lower Northeast. During our recent visit to that region, we met with a number of interlocutors who spoke openly about Newin's widening ambitions. Already regarded as one of Thailand's most unscrupulous operators, Newin has reportedly tried to leverage his control of the Ministry of the Interior for political gain. He has also apparently widened his networks in the police ranks and taken steps to expand his robust vote-buying operation. Most contacts believe the pragmatic and opportunistic Newin is also prepared to shift whichever the way the political winds blow in the next election, thereby ensuring he ends up on the winning team regardless of the outcome.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Despite Newin's stronghold in the Northeast provinces of Buriram, Surin, and Srisaket, his demonstrated willingness to resort to any and all means to expand his party's presence, and reported closeness to Defense Minister Prawit and Army Commander Anupong, both of whom purportedly harbor political ambitions and could eventually join Phumjai Thai, there are obvious limits to Newin's appeal and the efficacy of his tactics. Unlike former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is revered in a large number of provinces throughout the North and Northeast, Newin's popularity vanishes quickly the further one moves from his

political epicenter in Buriram. Several MPs we spoke to October 7-8 suggest that former PM Chavalit's return to politics as part of Puea Thai could blunt Phumjai Thai's expansion in the northeast. While we suspect that Newin and Phumjai Thai may successfully add a dozen or more seats in the next parliamentary elections, Newin's shenanigans are unlikely to yield the kind of electoral bounty that would allow Phumjai Thai to pivot from its current Kingmaking role in Thai politics to that of a major force in and of itself. End Summary and Comment.

WELCOME TO NEWIN-LAND

13. (C) On September 30 and October 1 we travelled to three Northeastern provinces along the Cambodian border -- Buriram, Surin and Sri Sa Ket -- which together constitute the heart of Newin Chidchob's political center of gravity in Thailand. Nowhere is his influence more pronounced than in Buriram, a province of nearly one and a half million people with a strong Cambodian influence; Newin himself is ethnically half-Khmer, and one of his monikers is "the Khmer Wizard." Bouncing from party to party, Newin represented Buriram in Parliament on and off from 1986 until 2007, when he was one of the 111 Thai Rak Thai party members banned by the Constitutional Court from holding office for five years. He then defected from the Thaksin orbit in late 2008, after an extended wooing from Democrat Party SecGen Suthep, and set up his own formal political vehicle: the Phumjai Thai party.

14. (C) Phumjai Thai currently holds eight of the 10 seats in Buriram; by all accounts, Newin is intent on making sure that number soon grows to ten out of ten in the next election

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cycle. According to former MP Panawat Liengphongpan (Note: Panawat was shot three times and nearly killed by Newin's brother in 1999. End Note), Newin had always treated Buriram like his own fiefdom. Since Phumjai Thai joined the coalition government in December of 2008, Panawat alleged, Newin had become bolder and given up any pretense of hiding his nefarious activities. Panawat described the current Governor of Buriram, Mongkol Surasajja, as little more than a Newin lackey, while claiming the provincial police force doubled as a canvassing operation for Phumjai Thai (note: police from Buriram and other nearby provinces are reputed to comprise the "blue shirt" street operators who have appeared in recent months during street protests by other colored forces, from the red-shirts in Pattaya in April to the yellow-shirts near Preah Vihear in September).

15. (C) According to Panawan, Newin's co-opting of government personnel in Buriram was so thorough that he had effectively blurred the lines between the party and the government. Newin did so with virtual impunity as well, secure in the knowledge that no one would penalize Newin or the party for violating laws prohibiting government authorities from participating in political affairs.

DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES AND THE ELECTION COMMISSION

16. (C) Given the scale of Newin's political dominance in Buriram, we asked Panawat whether there was anything that could be done to counter Newin's political machine during the next election. Panawat said that most of the residents of Buriram were cowed by Newin's operation and would never think of challenging him. The one exception to this was the local Puea Thai party branch. According to Panawat, Puea Thai was considering enlisting sympathetic Buriram housewives to surround polling stations on election-day. There was a general belief that if the housewives stood watch over the polling stations and used cameras and video recorders, police and election officials on Newin's payroll would be much less inclined to pay and intimidate voters or manipulate ballots. Panawat said that while he had never heard of anyone using

the tactic, he believed it just might work.

¶7. (C) According to members of Buriram's Election Commission, vote-buying and election fraud were deeply rooted problems firmly woven into the Thai political fabric. Several members of the Commission told us on September 30 that election-related corruption was not endemic to Buriram, but rather part of a larger, nationwide problem. Nepotism, Thai culture, poverty, and inadequate education were the driving forces behind it in Buriram, and despite limited tools and resources, the Buriram Election Commission was working hard to combat it.

¶8. (C) The Commission was using radio programming as part of its educational awareness push, deploying undercover operators to gather intelligence on vote buying, and even using the local equivalent of boy scouts to distribute literature and information regarding the negative impact of vote buying. Though none of the members of the Election Commission specifically implicated Newin in any election fraud activities (Note: Other contacts suggested several members of the Commission were on Newin's payroll. End note), all of our Election Commission interlocutors nevertheless agreed it was a very serious problem.

NEWIN'S APPEAL IN BURIRAM IS GENUINE

¶9. (C) According to Buriram Rajabhat University Professor Chaiya Chotikawanik, Newin's appeal in Buriram could not be explained away simply as a function of his willingness to use dirty political tricks each election cycle. While there was no question Newin played the money politics game at the highest level, there were plenty of dirty Thai politicians

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who failed to translate vote-buying into success. Newin was successful primarily because of his charisma, street smarts, and uncommon political touch. Drawing a comparison between Newin and former PM Thaksin, Chaiya told us that while Thaksin could smile for the cameras and give good speeches, he hesitated to get into the trenches to shake hands and talk with villagers. Newin, on the other hand, loved retail politicking, and was at his best when he was talking with his constituents in Buriram.

¶10. (C) Chaiya told us that he had first hand experience with Newin's political skills. Though Chaiya did not know Newin personally, when Chaiya's father passed away a few years ago, Newin was one of the first people in Buriram to send him flowers and a note. Newin then followed up with a phone call to Chaiya a few days later to check in on him and ask how his family was coping with its loss. Chaiya told us that as a professor of political science, he could not help but be impressed by the gesture and what it said for his finely tuned political acumen.

¶11. (C) According to Chaiya, Newin was revered in Buriram, and the Phumjai Thai party existed simply to serve as a vehicle for his popularity. Although Newin had openly resorted to vote-buying during elections, the reality was that his Phumjai Thai candidates would dominate elections in Buriram even without vote buying, food, and drinks Newin used to help lubricate the process on election-day. Chaiya told us that despite the fact that Thai culture and adherence to Buddhist norms were slowly evolving, the vast majority of voters who took money and/or food in exchange for their votes felt morally compelled to follow through and vote for the candidate who paid them. According to his best estimate, approximately 95 percent did so.

NEWIN THINKING BIG?

¶12. (C) Shortly after crossing over the Buriram border into neighboring Surin, we met with MP Satit Tepwongsirirut from

the Puea Pan Din party, which is currently split, with one wing in the coalition government and another in effective opposition. Satit used to work side by side with Newin in Thaksin's old People's Power Party (PPP), before striking out on his own with PPD after its disbandment in December 2008. Satit characterized Newin as sharp and driven, and told us that Newin had developed a name for himself through his tactical savvy.

¶13. (C) Newin always had the best ideas for creating a political buzz, said Satit, who credited Newin with being the intellectual architect behind the idea to march the red-shirts to Privy Council Chair GEN Prem Tinsulanonda's residence. (Note: we have heard many people give Newin and his lieutenants credit for helping create the red-shirts, particularly in shaping their early use of violence, such as September 2, 2008, when a red mob directed by known Newin associates attacked the yellow-shirts near Government House in the middle of the night, leading to one red-shirt death. End Note.)

¶14. (C) According to Satit, Newin had big goals for the next election cycle. Satit told us that Newin believed Phumjai Thai -- which currently holds only 31 of the 480 seats in the House of Representatives -- could increase its share of MP seats to 70 overall. In Surin alone, Satit said that Phumjai Thai currently controlled just three of the nine seats, but that it could realistically secure all nine in the next election, including Satit's seat. Satit himself was concerned that he would have to join forces with Phumjai Thai if he was to keep his job, a prospect he viewed with little enthusiasm. Satit hoped that Puea Thai would work to counterbalance Newin in Surin, but he was not overly optimistic.

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¶15. (C) On the subject of Newin's bag of dirty political tricks, Satit told us that Newin was willing to employ any and all means to obtain his political objectives. Intimidation was a favored Newin tool; he related a story of how during the last election, Newin had paraded a caravan of 20 pick-up trucks with a police escort through downtown Surin as a show of force. Newin then deployed all of the pick-up trucks throughout the province to engage in vote-buying and bullying. Satit viewed the convoy tactic as an act of psychological warfare and said that he shuddered to think what Newin -- who Satit believed saw himself as above the law -- would do during the next election.

¶16. (C) Satit also reported on Newin's use of the Ministries of Interior and Transportation (MOT and MOI) as political tools (Note: Phumjai Thai controls three Ministries: the Ministries of Interior, Commerce, and Transport. End Note.) In comments that mirrored what we have heard repeatedly from throughout the political spectrum, Satit told us that Newin had directed the MOT to build roads and develop rural areas based on the potential for increased voter support. Newin had similarly challenged the MOI to find ways to bolster infrastructure in rural areas with Phumjai Thai sympathies. Satit said significant numbers of local and provincial administrators joined Phumjai Thai as soon as it became clear Newin and his party would take control of these two critical ministries.

¶17. (C) Tactically speaking, Satit said that Newin was also using the MOI to burnish his personal image as a defender of the monarchy. Satit said Newin had asked the MOI to erect large posters and billboards of the King throughout Isaan. Residents of Isaan knew that Newin was behind these billboards; Newin hoped that this tactic, coupled with an attempt to portray Thaksin as against the monarchy, would help Phumjai Thai steal votes from Puea Thai in the next election. (Note: In a lunch with Ambassador earlier this summer, Newin repeatedly claimed he was primarily motivated by his loyalty/defense of the monarchy, chalking up his

defection from Thaksin to a judgment that Thaksin wanted to undermine the institution and replace the King in the hearts of Thai. End Note.)

¶18. (C) Turning to medium and longer term goals, Satit believed that Newin actually relished being banned from politics and pulling the puppet strings off stage. This allowed him to avoid blame when things failed to go according to plan. That said, Satit believed there was no limit to Newin's ambitions, and Satit said he had heard from multiple sources that Newin believed he would one day rise to become Prime Minister.

THE LIMITATIONS OF GOING GREEN

¶19. (C) Neighboring Sri Sa Ket province marks the transition from Newin territory into a Puea Thai stronghold. Phumjai Thai won only one of the nine MP seats (as part of the pro-Thaksin PPP) in the most recent parliamentary elections; the results of a recent by-election in Sri Sa Ket (REF B) would seem to suggest that Phumjai Thai faces a steep upward climb if it wishes to boost that number in the next round of elections. Thaksin friend and Puea Thai MP Thanate Kruarat told us that for now, Puea Thai was not overly concerned with Newin and his efforts to expand Phumjai Thai's share of the Sri Sa Ket parliamentary pie. Thanate claimed Newin had little to no popular appeal in Sri Sa Ket, and he doubted that would change anytime soon.

¶20. (C) Thanate acknowledged, however, that Phumjai Thai's tactics had forced Puea Thai to take some costly steps to counter Newin. In the by-election, for example, Thanate and Puea Thai installed video cameras in and around all the polling stations. Thanate then paid people to monitor each of the video feeds and to deploy Puea Thai loyalists any time

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the video monitors picked up any signs of illicit activity by Newin's men. Although Thanate believed Newin was presently little more than an irritant in Sri Sa Ket, he was sufficiently respectful of his ability to cause problems and manipulate the system that he felt compelled to remain vigilant during each election.

BEST FRIENEMIES?

¶21. (C) Throughout the course of our trip in the lower Northeast, we repeatedly heard that, despite the current bad blood between Phumjai Thai and Puea Thai, the two parties could bury the hatchet after the next election and make common cause once again. Professor Chaiya, for one, characterized such an outcome as likely, though he thought there would be limits to such collaboration. Chaiya did not believe, for example, that Newin would be willing to help former PM Thaksin try to return to Thailand. Puea Thai MP Thanate Kruarat also told us that he could easily see Puea Thai and Phumjai Thai coalescing after the next election, a sentiment we have heard repeatedly in Bangkok from majors players in both Puea Thai and Phumjai Thai.

ENTWISTLE